DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 449 479 CS 014 245

AUTHOR Edwards, Patricia A.; Danridge, Jennifer C.; Pleasants, Heather M.

TITLE Exploring Urban Teachers' and Administrators' Conceptions of At-Riskness. CIERA Report.

INSTITUTION Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement, Ann Arbor, MI.

SPONS AGENCY Spencer Foundation, Chicago, IL.; Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.

REPORT NO CIERA-2-010

PUB DATE 2000-12-15

NOTE 25p.

CONTRACT R305R70004

AVAILABLE FROM CIERA/University of Michigan, 610 E. University Ave., 1600 SEB, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1259. Web site: http://www.ciera.org.

PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Attitudes; Elementary Education; Family Environment; *High Risk Students; Interviews; *Parent Participation; Preschool Education; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Response; *Teaching Methods; Urban Education

IDENTIFIERS *Project Head Start

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the concept of "at-riskness" as defined by Head Start and elementary school professionals who work together in the same building. Using Bruner's (1996) idea of "folk theories," the authors show that the two groups' theories of at-riskness conflict and discuss how these definitions impact their practice with at-risk children. The authors used a series of exploratory interviews that probed for information about (1) student and family factors that contributed to at-riskness; (2) teacher and school responses to, expectations for, and beliefs about at-risk students; and (3) teacher and school intervention strategies for these students. They found that Head Start teachers and administrators, in general, were committed to working with children and families as a unit and assumed that parents were invested in their children's education, while elementary school administrators and teachers tended to identify a lack of parental involvement as disinterest and locate the responsibility for at-riskness within the individual child or family. Head Start and elementary school professionals need to begin conversations on this subject in order to bridge the gaps between the two programs. Contains 29 references and a table of data. (Author/RS)

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Patricia A. Edwards and Jennifer C. Danridge
Michigan State University

Heather M. Pleasants
Indiana State University

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CIERA REPORT #2-010
December 15, 2000

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CIERA Inquiry 2: Home and School
What does it mean for children to be "at-risk"? How do teachers' and administrators' definitions of at-riskness impact their approaches to intervention on behalf of at-risk students?

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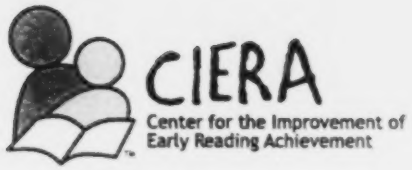

University of Michigan School of Education

610 E University Ave., Rm 1600 SEB
Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1259

734.647.6940 voice
734.615.4858 fax
ciera@umich.edu

www.ciera.org

Chapter forthcoming in the 49th Yearbook of the National Reading Conference.

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The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of the research reported in this paper from the Spencer Foundation Small Grant Program. In addition, the work reported herein was supported under the Educational Research and Development Centers Program PR/Award Number R305R70004, as administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. However, the contents do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the National Institute on Student Achievement, Curriculum, and Assessment or the National Institute on Early Childhood Development, or the U.S. Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the federal government.

Exploring Urban Teachers' and Administrators' Conceptions of At-Riskness

Patricia A. Edwards and Jennifer C. Danridge
Michigan State University

Heather M. Pleasants
Indiana State University

The term "at-risk" has become commonplace in recent discussions about students, families, schools, and educational policy (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Pallas, Natriello, & McDill, 1989). It typically serves as a label for students who are likely to experience adverse educational outcomes, such as low academic achievement, poor school attendance, grade retention, and dropping out (Johnson, 1997). Consequently, in theory, the term "at-risk" connotes a permanent psychoeducational condition that can be defined in absolute terms (Ayers & Ford, 1996; Clayton, 1996). However, much evidence suggests that "in practice" the term is vague, reflecting a lack of consensus about its meaning and criteria (Donmoyer & Kos, 1993; Richardson, Casanova, Placier, & Guilfoyle, 1989).

Thus, one of the primary aims of the present study is to develop an understanding of experiential and practice-based definitions of at-riskness that emerge from the perspectives of those who work most closely with children who are considered "at-risk" upon entering school. Specifically, we examine how teachers and administrators within Head Start and elementary classrooms define at-riskness, and we explore how these definitions impact the way that these school professionals attempt to intervene to positively affect the lives of students.

Within this research, we had the unique opportunity to study both the connections and disconnections between Head Start and elementary school professionals who worked within the same physical setting, a single elementary school. The Head Start program was located in the basement of the school building, and the elementary classrooms were located upstairs. At the outset of our research, we noted that the "downstairs" Head Start professionals had a vested interest in focusing on at-risk children and in developing specific ways to address their needs and concerns, while the elementary school teachers and administrators saw real and perceived obstacles to tailoring the

curriculum to the needs of at-risk learners. Thus, the idea of "upstairs" and "downstairs" professionals proved to be a salient metaphor for exploring the similarities and differences in how these two groups defined at-riskness and utilized that definition.

Toward an "Experiential" Conception of At-Riskness

The term "at-risk" has long been associated with students and families, and has been preceded by labels such as "culturally deficient," "remedial," "educationally disadvantaged," and "low-achieving" (Presseisen, 1988). Like the terminology that came before it, the designation of "at-risk" has an indelible quality (Rist, 1970) and is often broadly applied to children who struggle in school (Slavin, 1989). Unfortunately, this academic struggle seems to be a commonplace experience for many of our children, with estimates of students that could be considered "at-risk" falling between one third and one half of the population, and actual numbers climbing into the millions (Garard, 1995; Johnson, 1997).

These statistics are alarming, and they have led educators and educational researchers to begin asking critical questions about "at-riskness": What is it? What social, psychological, and environmental factors are associated with "risk"? Which particular groups of students in our educational system are currently at-risk and what can we do to minimize that risk? These kinds of questions, while based upon good intentions, seem to suggest that "at-riskness" is a pathology that particular groups of children, families, and communities "have," and ultimately, need to be "cured of." Ayers and Ford (1996) contend that this conceptualization of at-riskness as a "disease" is so pervasive because historically, the concept of "risk" was associated with the medical field. Consequently, the scientific importance placed upon the notion of "risk" within the medical community has helped to legitimate and validate the descriptive and explanatory power of the term "at-risk" in the field of education.

> 'At-risk' adds an authenticating medical dimension to a description and prescription made before the investigation begins. We talk of cancer risks and risk-factors for AIDS. Here social scientists—white coated and somber—attach that identical language to a specific group of children and their families. Society as we find it is assumed to be unquestionably healthy and well except for an invasion of 'at-risk' microorganisms; children carry the social disease; we must act boldly, scientifically, and in the best interest of the patient. Symptoms include a range of behaviors (teenage pregnancy, single-parent, mother-headed household) but the decisive indicators are being poor and black. Any of the other symptoms applied to a white, middle class professional, for example, are seen as a choice, or a temporary aberration, or something other than justification for membership in the 'at-risk' group. (Ayers & Ford, 1996, pp. 4-5)

Ayers and Ford's description of the "at-riskness as pathology" perspective highlights two important points. First, it underscores the tendency to "blame the victim." Pearson (1991) asserts that one fundamental problem associated with the concept of at-riskness is that it tends to place the blame for educational failure directly upon the shoulders of children, their families, and their communities. In doing so, schools, and society at-large, are absolved of their responsibilities to meet the educational needs of diverse populations. Rather than helping these students, the "at-risk" label can further mitigate their educational progress by perpetuating negative stereotypes about students and families from diverse backgrounds and/or those who live in poverty communities (Ayers & Ford, 1996; Clayton, 1996; Fine, 1988).

Second, the Ayers and Ford description reveals an emerging consensus around the definition of "at-riskness" and its contributory factors within educational discourse communities (Pearson, 1991). Based upon theoretical and empirical work (see Lind, 1997; McDill, Natriello, & Pallas, 1986; Presseisen, 1988), educational researchers have identified a variety of environmental, social, and cultural factors that can potentially cause "at-riskness," including:

- minority racial/ethnic group identity;
- living in a low socioeconomic household;
- living in a single-parent family;
- having a poorly educated mother;
- having a non-English language background;
- living in an impoverished neighborhood and/or community; and
- living in a violent neighborhood and/or community.

Knapp and Turnball (1990) argue that these kinds of "at-risk" factors have become well-established in researchers' and policymakers' "conventional wisdom" about students who are unsuccessful in school. Consequently, these environmental, social, and cultural factors are often treated as givens rather than being rigorously tested or critically examined as "potential causes" of at-riskness.

Yet not all teachers view these factors as "risk" factors. For example, Ladson-Billings's (1994) work provides a vivid portrait of teachers who believe that students' cultural and familial backgrounds are not "risk" factors. These teachers believe that all students can succeed, and they scaffold students' learning by building upon the cultural and social knowledge that students bring into the classroom. Similarly, Peterson, Bennet, and Sherman (1991) found that successful teachers of at-risk students tend to view cultural diversity as a strength rather than a "deficit" or a "risk." In doing so, these teachers were able to hold high expectations for their students, create a community of learners within the classroom, and develop supportive interpersonal relationships with students and their families.

Thus, the overarching question of our study is: How do the educators who work most closely with these children—school administrators, teachers, and support staff—conceptualize at-riskness? Do their views about at-risk students resonate more closely with the "conventional wisdom" of researchers

and policymakers? Currently, we have little information about the definitions of at-riskness which originate, are produced by, and are utilized in the daily lives of those within school settings. In an age in which connections between concepts and practice have been increasingly emphasized, we feel that is vital that the terms we use to describe students, the meanings behind those terms, and the way that those terms are used to facilitate academic and social support for students are all linked to the day-to-day practices of those who work within schools.

Goldenberg and Gallimore (1991) affirm our beliefs that this kind of "local" knowledge about at-riskness that teachers, administrators, and staff have constructed based upon their experiences is essential to the transformative work of the educational research community. They argue that, in order for educational change to occur, educational researchers must learn about sources of teachers' and administrators' "local knowledge"; in particular, they must understand how contextual, cultural, and interpersonal forces shape the ways that "researcher knowledge," in the form of educational innovations and reforms, is implemented. While our study does not focus on reform, we found Goldenberg and Gallimore's (1991) discussion of local knowledge particularly useful because it suggested that educational phenomena (i.e., "at-riskness") must be first understood within the context of interpersonal relationships (i.e., school/home, teacher/student, teacher/parent) and school experience.

Educators and Their Folk Theories About At-Riskness

We believe that the ideas that teachers and administrators have about children are typically formed through professional training, classroom experiences, and their own experiences in school. These intricate tapestries of memories and experiences are woven into persistent beliefs and assumptions about children, teaching, and the world. Paley (1979) provides a compelling example:

> Each year I greet thirty new children with a clear picture in mind of who shall be called "bright" and who shall be called "well-behaved." Ask me where these "facts" come from and I will probably refer to my professional background. Yet I doubt that the image I carry of the intelligent, capable child has changed much since my own elementary school days. It has been intellectualized and rationalized, but I suspect it is much the same... (p.xiv)

Consequently, teachers like Paley, as well as administrators and other school staff, draw upon their own experiences, memories, beliefs, and assumptions as a vital source of information as they teach and work with students in schools. Bruner (1996) uses the term "folk theories" to describe these kinds of "deep truths" educators develop from their personal and professional lives. In fact, Bruner contends that these folk theories are a driving force of teaching and learning:

> Teaching, in a word, is inevitably based on notions about the nature of the learner's mind. Beliefs and assumptions about teaching,

> whether in a school or in any other context, are a direct reflection of the beliefs and assumptions the teacher holds about the learner. (p. 47)

In sum, school professionals have "folk theories," or loosely organized beliefs, assumptions, and ideologies, about the children they are teaching. These theories tend to be based upon experience and intuition rather than upon formal education and empirical research, thus they are considered "folk" or common, everyday theories. Paley's description of the "well-behaved" and "bright" student exemplifies this point; her conceptualizations of these students were based upon her "folk experiences" as a professional educator and as an elementary school student. Further, Bruner argues that educational practices (i.e., curriculum, instruction, assessment) are deeply rooted within school professionals' folk theories.

We believed that Bruner's notion of "folk theories" would be useful in our investigation of teachers' and administrators' conceptions of at-riskness for two reasons. First, we thought that folk theories provided the "experiential" basis for the school professionals' views of at-riskness because their folk theories would be primarily rooted within their professional and personal experiences in school. Second, we thought that "folk theories" adequately portrayed the durability and strength of teachers' and administrators' conceptions of at-riskness. Consequently, we argue that the folk theories that educators construct can play an integral part in creating and reproducing educational at-riskness if they remain implicit and unexamined.

Thus, our study focuses on three critical questions:

1. What are Head Start teachers' and administrators' folk theories of at-riskness?

2. What are elementary school teachers' and administrators' folk theories of at-riskness?

3. How are these school professionals' folk theories similar and/or different?

Our contextual focus on Head Start and elementary school classrooms was important for two reasons. First, because Head Start is a program explicitly focused on serving the educational needs of disadvantaged or "at-risk" students, and because Head Start students matriculate into elementary schools, we deemed it necessary to understand how professionals within this particular setting develop ideas about what it means to be at-risk, and how at-risk students can be supported in a school setting. Second, our preliminary understanding of Head Start and elementary classrooms led us to perceive potential "disconnections" between the ideas of Head Start and elementary school professionals when it comes to teaching and interacting with students who are considered at-risk.

Method

Setting

We conducted our study at Baker School, an urban, midwestern elementary school that serves approximately 320 students. Over half of the student population is composed of racial/ethnic minorities, and 90.6% of the enrolled students are eligible for free and reduced lunch (Michigan School Report, 1998).

In this community, Head Start programs are typically located in public school buildings. At Baker Elementary School, the Head Start program was located in the basement. Initially, we thought that this school afforded a wonderful opportunity for Head Start and elementary school teachers to share pertinent information about practices and strategies that proved effective for at-risk students. However, we soon discovered that, although the Head Start program and the elementary school program resided in the same school, they operated as two completely different educational institutions.

Case Study Design: The Upstairs/Downstairs Metaphor

We used a case study approach within a social constructivist theoretical framework (Schwandt, 1994; Sturtevant, 1996) to examine how Head Start and elementary school professionals develop their folk theories of at-riskness. Our case study involves elements of both intrinsic and instrumental case studies (Stake, 1995). It is intrinsic because we are interested in how this specific context, which combines Head Start and elementary school classrooms, provides an environment which shapes how educators think about at-riskness. It is also instrumental, because our investigation is focused by a need to understand how definitions of at-riskness are created and used by teachers and administrators working in the context of Head Start and elementary school. Consequently, we used a case study design because it is appropriate for examining one particular phenomena (i.e., school professionals' folk theories of at-riskness) in one particular context (i.e., Baker Elementary School), and this specificity of focus makes it useful "for questions, situations or puzzling occurrences arising for everyday practice" (Merriam, 1988, p. 11).

As discussed above, we initially used the upstairs/downstairs metaphor to describe the context for the Head Start and elementary school programs at Baker Elementary School. As our study developed, we continued to use this metaphor to think about the relationship between these two programs in the school. For example, we found it interesting that there were no formal or informal structures that fostered communication between the Head Start and elementary school professionals, particularly because they worked with the same group of children and families labeled "at-risk." Consequently, investigating possible explanations for these disconnections between Head Start and elementary school professionals became central to our study.

We found one of the most salient reasons for the seemingly disconnected relationship between these two programs to be the elementary school's embarrassment in acknowledging that they needed a Head Start program. Mrs. McClain, the Head Start Director, commented:

> Some districts and schools don't want to recognize that they have poor children with some potential problems... They would like to say 'we don't have any of those kinds of kids in our schools' so there's a reluctance to have a Head Start program because they don't want it to be known that they have Head Start eligible children in their district. So we have to really fight to get space and acknowledgment in some of these school buildings.

Mrs. McClain's explanation illuminates the reality that occurs in many urban elementary schools that house Head Start programs. Although it seems that this would be a wonderful opportunity for these two educational programs to forge collaborative relationships, these partnerships are not always established. Some elementary schools view Head Start as a socioeducational stigma because it serves "at-risk" children and families, a population that some schools are all too willing to forget.

The upstairs/downstairs metaphor not only reflected differences in how the socioeconomic bases of at-riskness are addressed within the two school environments, but also highlighted differences in how Head Start and elementary school professionals view the instruction of at-risk students. Downstairs, the Head Start teachers demonstrated their willingness to meet learners at their own levels by providing appropriate scaffolding and nurturing. Upon these children's entrance into the schooling process, the downstairs teachers invited and encouraged parents to travel with their children as they climbed towards academic success. However, once children arrived upstairs to the elementary school, some teachers expected children and their families to continue the climb towards academic success with little or no support from them. In other words, it was "not their job" to come down the steps and support students in their climb from downstairs. Mrs. Parson's comment exemplifies this point:

> We have families in Head Start and encourage them to be involved in their child's education. But when they go to kindergarten, the public schools don't want them to be in the school. I know one of the teachers upstairs would rather not have parents in the classroom, and I think it's a shame.

Mrs. Parson's comment provided further evidence of the contrasts between the downstairs Head Start environment and the upstairs mentality of elementary school teachers and administrators. In Table 1, we briefly describe the participants in our study. In light of the upstairs/downstairs metaphor, the interviews of each participant have been used in our analyses to explore the questions of how at-riskness is defined in the two settings and how these definitions are used in working with children.

Data Collection and Analysis

Bruner (1996) notes that folk theories must be made explicit in order for them to be studied, and ultimately, to be changed. Thus, to systematically uncover the Head Start and elementary school professionals' folk theories about at-riskness, we used an interview methodology that Kvale (1996) calls *exploratory*. In this type of interview study, the interview is open and has little structure, and the purpose of the interview is to gain new information, perspectives, and insights about a complex problem or issue from the participant's point of view. For the purposes of our study, the exploratory interviews focused upon each participant's own ideas and beliefs about working with at-risk students and their families.

We interviewed each of the Head Start and elementary school teachers and administrators at Baker Elementary School over the course of several school days. In total, 12 school professionals participated in our study, and they are listed below in Table 1. All participants except Mr. Carr were interviewed in May 1998. He joined the staff in August 1998, and we conducted an interview with him in mid-September.

Table 1: The "Upstairs/Downstairs" Programs at Baker Elementary

THE UPSTAIRS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PROGRAM			
Name	**Position**	**Years Experience**	**Race**
Mr. Carr	Current Principal, 1998-present	28	European American
Mrs. Bates	Interim Principal, 1997-98	24	Middle Eastern
Mr. Spooner	Former Principal, 1986-97	27	African American
Mrs. Mims	Kindergarten Teacher	25	European American
Ms. Mora	Kindergarten Teacher	10	European American
THE DOWNSTAIRS HEAD START PROGRAM			
Name	**Position**	**Years Experience**	**Race**
Mrs. McClain	Director of Head Start	22	European American
Mrs. Warr	Head Start Coordinator	29	European American
Mrs. Norris	Family Services Coordinator	12	European American
Mrs. Boles	Head Start Teacher	8	European American
Mrs. Garcia	Head Start Teacher	7	European American
Mrs. Parson	Head Start Teacher	9	European American
Mrs. Gonzales	Assistant Head Start Teacher	3	Hispanic American

Each of the 12 interviews were audiotaped and lasted approximately 45 minutes to one hour. Overall, the interviews probed for information in three broad domains: (a) student and family factors which contribute to at-riskness; (b) teacher and school responses to, expectations for, and beliefs about at-risk students; and (c) teacher and school intervention strategies for at-risk students.

We used the upstairs/downstairs metaphor to guide our data analysis. After the interviews were transcribed, we examined the similarities and differences between the downstairs Head Start professionals and the upstairs elementary school professionals using an adaptation of the constant

comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as an analytic framework. We read the transcripts several times and developed general impressions about the folk theories of at-riskness for each Head Start and elementary school professional. Next, we combed the data for emergent themes and patterns within these folk theories that specifically addressed how Head Start and elementary school professionals defined at-riskness and the strategies they used to deal with this student population. Consequently, we developed "key linkages" that connect our assertions about downstairs and upstairs professionals with the data (Florio-Ruane, Raphael, Glazier, McVee, & Wallace, 1997). Throughout the analyses, we discussed these linkages and used them to revise and/or reject our assertions, which in turn produced stronger analytic linkages within and across the talk of Head Start and elementary school teachers and administrators.

We present our findings as framed by significant key linkages from two separate data analyses. The first analysis compared and contrasted the folk theories of the downstairs Head Start administrators and upstairs elementary school administrators. The second analysis compared and contrasted the folk theories of the downstairs Head Start teachers and the upstairs elementary school teachers.

Results

Comparisons Between Downstairs Head Start Administrators and Upstairs Elementary School Administrators

The Head Start administrators that we interviewed seemed to conceptualize students and parents as one unit. For example, Mrs. Warr commented, "I think that we [Head Start] look at children and the families as something that is inseparable. They are an entity and we have to work with children and parents to help them both succeed." Clearly, Mrs. Warr's comment centers around a folk theory that Head Start administrators tend to have about how families' educational, social, and cultural milieus are factored into their children's academic experiences.

The downstairs administrators' strategy was to reduce educational at-riskness by improving parents' understandings about themselves and what they needed to do to enhance their children's learning. Mrs. Norris explained:

> They might not always know how to love their child, how to show that they love their child, or how to help them succeed. And I think that is what our purpose is: to help parents to recognize their feelings and to recognize how to deal with those feelings and how to work with their child.

Toward this end, the Head Start administrators offered a great deal of support to parents to help them to actively take control of their own lives and their children's education. They constantly collaborated with community

mental health and family services agencies to provide parents with seminars and workshops that focused on life management skills such as employability, basic reading and writing, and child rearing/discipline techniques. Mrs. Warr explained, "We have a team concept in Head Start where we have the teacher, the teacher assistant, the family service worker, mental health workers, and myself...we all work as a team to improve the quality of life of our children and the families we serve."

This team approach to dealing with parents' personal issues served as the Head Start administrators' "grand" folk theory for structuring parent involvement in the program. For example, parents were required to chaperone on the school bus and work in the classroom once a month, and Head Start administrators worked closely with the teachers to facilitate that level of parent involvement. More important, the Head Start administrators used these requirements as opportunities to teach parents how to become more supportive of their children's education. Mrs. McClain explained:

> I think Head Start is grounded in the idea that parents want the best for their child. Parents are the children's first teachers and we need to really pay attention to that...we expect the children will always do their best and we want to share that kind of a philosophy with the parents.

Thus, the downstairs Head Start administrators dealt with the multiple risk factors that students faced by closely working with parents. They used a "team approach" to intervention that enabled them to provide parents with training and skills that made significant differences in their personal lives and their children's education.

Upstairs, two of the elementary school administrators shared similar folk theories with the downstairs administrators. Mr. Carr and Mr. Spooner were community activists who viewed educational at-riskness as a serious issue for the entire community:

Mr. Carr: We need to start defining problems and talking about solutions in those terms. For example, most urban schools talk about discipline. That's not the issue—getting more police in schools won't solve anything. We should be looking at community mental health issues as a way to help our schools. Problems and issues are situated within a geographical context, which incorporates problems with housing, welfare, mental health... and schools are situated within these contexts, too.

Mr. Spooner: There needs to be ways that adults, especially significant adults in the community, can help educate kids. Not only parents, [but] significant other adults who care about school, period. Because it's not a one person job, not that one teacher's job, [but] it's all of our jobs.

These two administrators' comments resonated with the Head Start perspective that a concerted effort among teachers, parents, and the community is necessary in order to positively transform students' educational experiences. This perspective reflects a folk theory that at-riskness is not just a label for students and families, but that it also represents any community that allows children to become discouraged and fail in school.

However, unlike the downstairs Head Start program, the elementary school program was not grounded in this kind of "grand" folk theory. The upstairs program did not have an overarching perspective about at-riskness that characterized the administrators' personal folk theories. Moreover, the elementary school program had neither a built-in supportive "team approach" nor a preexisting organizational structure to effectively deal with multiple risk factors. It is our conjecture that the elementary school program lacked these essential components because the school district did not have well-defined policies and systems for effectively working with at-risk children and families. Thus, when new administrators arrived, it was possible that there would be inconsistencies between their folk understandings of at-riskness and those from the previous administration.

Mrs. Bates's administrative term at Baker Elementary School exemplifies this point. Unlike her predecessor Mr. Spooner, Mrs. Bates's policies reflected her folk theories that academic at-riskness was primarily a "student" issue. Her interview highlighted the school's best strategies for working with at-risk children as those that were student-focused, such as Reading Recovery and the Reading is Fundamental Program. Although she acknowledged that parents do "need education and skills to help their children," she admitted that the elementary school program didn't have "the time or the money" to effectively help parents deal with their educational and personal issues.

Furthermore, Mrs. Bates did not espouse an interest in increasing parents' involvement in their children's academic lives. She believed that parents were "pretty active" due to the 96% attendance rate at parent-teacher conferences and the high attendance at musical performances and talent shows. However, these activities did not necessarily promote parents' involvement with their children's schoolwork. Consequently, Mrs. Bates attributed this problem to parents' lack of intrinsic motivation:

> The [problem is] intrinsic motivation. They [Head Start] have extrinsic motivation downstairs. If parents don't get involved, it is punishable; the child is removed from school. But at the public school we cannot say that. So some parents feel that they are OK, and that the school can take care of their children.

Mrs. Bates' comment illustrates her perception that the downstairs program had more "academic" parent involvement than the elementary school simply because they could remove children from the Head Start program. She did not seek out any other plausible explanations for Head Start's high levels of parent involvement, nor did she attempt to implement new ideas that would motivate parents to become more involved when their children arrived upstairs.

Administrators are organizational leaders, and the programs and structures that they implement affect teachers, students, and families. The Head Start program provided administrators with a conceptual framework (or "grand" folk theory) for thinking about and working with at-risk students and their families. The supportive nature of these programs and structures reflected Head Start's commitment to working with students and families as a unit, a notion espoused by Hymes (1974): "To touch the child is to touch the parent. To praise the child is to praise the parent. To criticize the child is to hit at the parent. The two are two, but the two are one" (p. 9). Unfortunately, when school districts do not provide well-conceptualized philosophies or

adequate programmatic structures for educating "at-risk" children, it can be extremely difficult for elementary school administrators to translate their good intentions into effective strategies. More important, since administrators are instructional leaders as well, their decisions impact how teachers conceptualize and work with "at-risk" students and their families. In the next section, we examine this issue more closely.

Comparisons Between Downstairs Head Start Teachers and Upstairs Elementary School Teachers

We found that teachers' folk theories about at-riskness varied along three major dimensions: (a) at-riskness located within the student, (b) at-riskness located within the family, and (c) parent involvement as an intervention for at-riskness.

Theme 1: At-riskness located within the student

Head Start teachers tended to be uncomfortable using academic terms to define at-riskness. For example, when asked to describe a student who would fail, Mrs. Parson commented, "I have a hard time... I don't really think in those terms." Consequently, Head Start teachers' folk theories about at-riskness emphasized social and behavioral indicators:

Mrs. Boles: When students come into the program scared and even after two weeks, they're still not ready to talk or ready to try new things, I kinda worry about those kids... I have a student like that now. She is able to try some things, but when an adult asks her a question, she won't answer.

Mrs. Garcia: I guess children who are set up for failure are children who sometimes have behavioral problems and they don't get along socially.

Head Start teachers used classroom management techniques and structured play environments to facilitate development of students' social and behavioral skills. We believe that the downstairs teachers' concern about development guided their instructional approached as well. Thus, Head Start teachers' folk theories acknowledged that children acquire academic skills according to their own timetables. Mrs. Boles' comment elaborates this point further:

> We try to accommodate every individual child according to need. If a child has a hard time cutting, we have special scissors and we work with them on cutting things. We try to provide lots of opportunities to give that child chances to cut because we've had children who have never cut before coming to Head Start [because] they don't have [scissors]. So they come to Head Start for the first time never having used scissors or even crayons.

Mrs. Boles's statement reflects how Head Start teachers viewed teaching at-risk students. Their strategies focused upon reducing educational risk by providing multiple opportunities for students to develop new social, behavioral, and academic skills.

In contrast, the upstairs elementary school teachers believed children were "ready to learn" once they had developed a specific set of academic and social skills. Consequently, their folk theory of at-riskness was often grounded in descriptions of students who came upstairs to kindergarten without these skills:

Mrs. Mims: A student who will fail is one who comes in very unprepared for kindergarten, with very little prior knowledge. I've got children that come in that literally do not know how to hold a crayon or a pencil. I mean, we're not talking about holding it perfectly or even knowing the colors. These kids just don't have it at home.

Mrs. Mora: I expect them just to come and be ready to learn and be here... I send homework home three nights out of the week. I expect it back the next day, and I expect parents to sit down for five minutes with their child to make sure that they're at least forming letters correctly.

These two excerpts demonstrate the elementary school teachers' conceptions of at-riskness as skill deficits. Students were expected to come upstairs to kindergarten with skills, particularly academic skills, in order to begin working in "real school." Thus, the child was conceptualized as "at-risk" when he or she did not exhibit behaviors teachers identified as commensurate with being "ready to learn."

Theme 2: At-riskness located within the family

Although Head Start teachers and elementary school teachers believed that parents have a responsibility to help their children learn, their folk theories about at-risk families were quite different. Head Start teachers conceptualized students and their families as one unit, thus their folk theories did not implicate families as at-risk, despite the financial difficulties that virtually all of the Head Start families faced. While the teachers did acknowledge their families' economic issues, they did not assume that these situations caused academic at-riskness. In fact, Head Start teachers tended to have folk theories that reconceptualized poverty as a human rather than an economic condition. Mrs. Parson commented:

> You know, there are poor children but there are poor children that are not poor in spirit. There are lots of families that I know that are just poor in spirit. You know, regardless of how much money they ever have, they're still gonna be poor in spirit. I find it's harder to work with families that are poor in spirit than it is to work with families that are just poor. It's harder to give kids who are poor in spirit self-esteem and make the parents understand that they need to be there for their kids.

In contrast, the kindergarten teachers conceptualized at-riskness as unavoidable and uncontrollable for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. In the following statements they express their views about the academic liability that familial poverty might cause for students:

Mrs. Mims: I've taught on the opposite scale, and in those schools you're overrun with parents... It might be just the economic area that we're in because here it's like pulling teeth to get parents to come in... And the parents feel it's your job, so they don't

do much at home. I've got children right now who'll bring back a homework paper and it's only got a pencil scribble on it.

Mrs. Mora: I've got six kids who are just lagging. And those six kids who are just lagging, I can tell you right now there's just absolutely no structure, nothing at home. I mean, you know these kids just aren't gonna do well in school. Especially with the problems these parents have in their lives.

Unlike the Head Start teachers, these two elementary school teachers made explicit connections between familial financial circumstances and student performance. They considered students to be at-risk because they linked students' academic difficulties to their parents' economic status. Since they considered these familial circumstances to be unchangeable, both elementary school teachers expressed some frustration and concern about these children's futures. More importantly, they seemed resigned to the fact that these children would have limited academic success in their futures because their families were not financially secure.

Further, the two elementary school teachers, and particularly Mrs. Mims, held a folk theory which connected low socioeconomic status and low parental expectations. This is evident in Mrs. Mims' comment, "I think sometimes low-income parents think that kindergarten is a day care... and I let them know that it's a real academic situation and that I have high expectations." Mrs. Mims's comment suggests that parents could not help their children achieve unless they adjusted their expectations about the educational environment of kindergarten. Specifically, her comments alluded to the fact that parents from low socioeconomic backgrounds might experience difficulty helping their child make the transition from the structured play environment of the downstairs Head Start or other preschool programs to the rigor of "real school." Unfortunately, Mrs. Mims did not believe it was her responsibility to help make this transition smoother for these parents because "it's their job to help their children be successful in school."

Theme 3: Parent involvement as an intervention for at-riskness

Since the Head Start program views child and family as one unit, Head Start teachers tended to deal with student issues in terms of the families. Teachers acquired information about families by doing home visits. Although some parents were initially uncomfortable having teachers in their homes, the Head Start families typically enjoyed these visits as informal meetings with the teachers. Teachers used home visits to begin working with parents and children before they entered the classroom. Mrs. Boles commented, "We can flag the problem right there at the home visit and hopefully we can get the ball rolling to resolve it. For example, if there is a speech concern, we can have the parent sign a permission slip and already get that going." This proactive perspective is reflected in Mrs. Garcia's comment as well:

> A major part of the Head Start program is working with the parents. The program is family oriented, so that pushes us to get out there to find out more about what's going on in our families' lives. The same old thing isn't gonna work every time and we know that.

In contrast, the upstairs elementary school teachers tended to use the "same old thing" that Mrs. Garcia and the other Head Start teachers knew would not work with all parents. Mrs. Mims and Ms. Mora relied upon traditional

school practices such as writing notes to parents, telephoning parents, and parent-teacher conferences to initiate contact with parents. For instance, Mrs. Mims noted:

> I try to get to know them as much as I can. Unfortunately, there's some that you cannot reach and you may write and call and write and call and pin notes and there's still no response. When that happens, I feel bad for the child. It's a shame that I literally have to hound some parents to get them to come to see about their child.

This comment illustrates the limited kinds of intervention strategies that the elementary school teachers used to communicate with families. When these very brief, traditional methods did not work, Mrs. Mims and Ms. Mora believed that the parents didn't care or couldn't care for their children. Unlike the downstairs Head Start teachers, neither elementary school teacher considered doing home visits as an intervention strategy. In fact, one teacher commented that she used these visits as a "threat" to get parents to attend parent-teacher conferences! Consequently, the upstairs teachers did not use parent involvement as an effective intervention strategy for reducing at-riskness.

To summarize, the "upstairs" elementary school teachers and the "downstairs" Head Start teachers had very different folk theories about at-riskness. The elementary school teachers' folk theories resonated with Ayers and Ford's (1996) description of "at-riskness as pathology." Indeed, these two teachers' comments suggested that the children and their families were primarily responsible for their academic "deficits." As a result, the "upstairs" teachers tended to absolve themselves of any responsibility when traditional educational practices failed; they simply assumed that parents did not care about education. In contrast, the "downstairs" Head Start teachers tended to believe that parents did care about their children's education, but that they needed additional guidance and support in order to transform that concern into academic achievement. The Head Start teachers work collaboratively with parents toward that achievement goal because their folk theories conceptualized children and families as "resilient" rather than as "at-risk."

Recommendations

Our study examined the folk theories held by downstairs Head Start professionals and upstairs elementary school professionals working with the same group of at-risk children. We investigated these folk theories for two reasons. First, we believe that it is important for the educational research community to have a better understanding of the "local knowledge" (Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1991) that educators have about at-riskness. Teachers, administrators, and other school staff in any given school have had a wealth of personal and professional experiences, and it is important to understand how their folk theories, rooted within day-to-day interactions with at-risk students and their families, have shaped the educational practices, policies, and programs that are currently at work in their school. In light of the "conventional wisdom" that has the tendency to blame at-riskness upon students

and families from culturally diverse and/or low socioeconomic backgrounds, it is imperative that we begin to listen to school professionals who have transformative views of at-riskness that yield academic improvement.

Second, we studied the folk theories of at-riskness at Baker Elementary School because it housed both a Head Start and an elementary school program. Initially, we thought that we would find a "convergence" in the folk theories about at-risk students and their families across the two programs because we assumed that these two institutions were collaborators. To us, it seems logical that Head Start programs were put into public schools in an effort to make smooth transitions for these students, yet this did not occur at Baker Elementary School for several reasons. Our study highlighted how physical location (upstairs/downstairs), as well as the conceptual and philosophical distance suggested by the school professionals' contrasting folk theories, created disconnections between the Head Start and the elementary school programs.

Most educators agree that Head Start can be an important educational experience for students considered "at-risk." Ironically this program was being treated as a second-rate program by the upstairs teachers and administrators at Baker Elementary School. We believe that Head Start and elementary school teachers and administrators want students to succeed, but they might not know how to begin building the bridges to accomplish this goal. Further, we believe one way elementary school teachers and administrators can accomplish this goal is through "conversations" with Head Start professionals. In particular, we recommend the following courses of action:

Find Out What Strategies Are Already Working for At-Risk Children and Continue to Use Them

Head Start and elementary school professionals need to begin by talking about what they are doing that is effective for at-risk children. This conversation is extremely critical because at-risk students need continuity between their Head Start experiences and their elementary school experiences.

Facilitate Open Communication Between Head Start and Elementary School Administrators

It is critical that Head Start and elementary school administrators talk to each other, as they are the leaders of two important educational institutions. As leaders, they must begin to identify and question some of their own folk theories about at-risk students and families, and they must be willing to hear other professionals' folk theories. In our study, we found that the "grand" folk theories of at-riskness, or those institutionalized via organizational structures or policies, can be radically different for Head Start and elementary school programs. Thus, the gap between these programs can be bridged as teachers and administrators from downstairs and upstairs come together and work collaboratively toward intervention strategies and reforms that build upon and expand the strengths of these "grand" folk theories.

Foster Sensitivity Toward At-Risk Students and Their Families

Today, families face many serious issues such as unemployment, financial crises, drug/alcohol addiction, and illiteracy. Head Start and elementary school professionals should be aware of these multiple risk factors. Further, there should be a mechanism in place that begins with Head Start and continues as the children move "upstairs" to begin their public school experience.

Involve the School District

School districts need to become part of the mechanism that builds bridges between Head Start and elementary school programs. It appears that some districts have assumed that there is a relationship between Head Start and elementary school, but have not deeply considered the nature of this relationship and what it should look like. Further, our paper suggests that school districts can do a great disservice to at-risk children and their families by assuming that placing Head Start programs in a public school setting automatically builds connections between the Head Start and public school programs.

As educators, we can no longer simply blame students and their families for their at-riskness. Fine (1988) asserts that "the concept of 'at-risk' obscures the systematic nature of education...it deceptively locates the problem in the individual students, their families, their communities rather than in the structural realities that constrain their educational, social, and economic lives" (p.116). In our paper, we found that these kinds of structural inequalities were formed when Head Start and elementary school professionals were not "on the same page" around issues of educational at-riskness. We hope that this paper serves as a call to action.

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The Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA) is the national center for research on early reading and represents a consortium of educators in five universities (University of Michigan, University of Virginia, and Michigan State University with University of Southern California and University of Minnesota), teacher educators, teachers, publishers of texts, tests, and technology, professional organizations, and schools and school districts across the United States. CIERA is supported under the Educational Research and Development Centers Program, PR/Award Number R305R70004, as administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education.

Mission. CIERA's mission is to improve the reading achievement of America's children by generating and disseminating theoretical, empirical, and practical solutions to persistent problems in the learning and teaching of beginning reading.

CIERA Research Model

The model that underlies CIERA's efforts acknowledges many influences on children's reading acquisition. The multiple influences on children's early reading acquisition can be represented in three successive layers, each yielding an area of inquiry of the CIERA scope of work. These three areas of inquiry each present a set of persistent problems in the learning and teaching of beginning reading:

CIERA INQUIRY 1
Readers and Texts

Characteristics of readers and texts and their relationship to early reading achievement. What are the characteristics of readers and texts that have the greatest influence on early success in reading? How can children's existing knowledge and classroom environments enhance the factors that make for success?

CIERA INQUIRY 2
Home and School

Home and school effects on early reading achievment. How do the contexts of homes, communities, classrooms, and schools support high levels of reading achievement among primary-level children? How can these contexts be enhanced to ensure high levels of reading achievement for all children?

CIERA INQUIRY 3
Policy and Profession

Policy and professional effects on early reading achievement. How can new teachers be initiated into the profession and experienced teachers be provided with the knowledge and dispositions to teach young children to read well? How do policies at all levels support or detract from providing all children with access to high levels of reading instruction?

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CIERA is a collaboration of
University of Michigan
University of Virginia
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with
University of Minnesota
University of Southern California

University of Michigan School of Education
610 E University Av, Rm 1600 SEB
Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1259
734.647.6940 voice
734.763.1229 fax
ciera@umich.edu

www.ciera.org